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PRESS RELEASE

AUSTRALIAN COUNCIL FOR
OVERSEAS AID

EAST TIMOR DIVIDES ASIAN CHRISTIANS

SEOUL 2 JULY

Debate on the issue of East Timor has sharply divided the Eighth Assembly of the Christian Conference of Asia and led to a decision by the Indonesian churches to withdraw from all committees of the Regional Conference of Churches and Christian Councils.

Some 300 Christians from throughout Asia attended the CCA Assembly in Seoul which ended on 2 July.

Distribution of newsletters on the situation in East Timor and the presence at the Assembly of East Timorese Roman Catholic Priest, Father Francisco Fernandes from Australia, led to intense debate. The Catholic Church is not a member of CCA. Fr Fernandes told an informal meeting of 80 people attending the Assembly that "my people depend on refugees like myself to lift the heavy batik blanket under which Indonesia has smothered them to give the outside world a glimpse of the true reality".

He said the Catholic Church in East Timor is "walking with the people" and appealed to the Assembly" to take up our cause with your churches and governments in the interests of achieving a just and lasting peace for my beloved people". He presented to the informal meeting a petition signed by 110 churches and Christian organisations in Asia, Australia and the Pacific.

The Indonesian church representatives refused to share a platform with Fr Fernandes but gained the permission of the Assembly to read a statement in response. The Rev Arno Thobias of West Timor said he did not reject what had been said regarding East Timor but went on to question the integrity of the organising committee that allowed a person from East Timor to be present without their knowing it.

Dr Bert Supit of Sulawesi read a prepared statement that traced the history of East Timor and explained why Indonesia had stepped into "the power vacuum when the Portugese could not control the island".

"It is not true to speak about genocide in East Timor. The purpose of the Indonesian army is not to kill but to assist families to be reunited" he said.

Referring to the Communion of Churches in Indonesia (PGI) which represents 90% of the Protestant Churches, he said the PGI "stands for ending of confrontation and solving social problems and reconcilliation of families, clans and people. But this can only occur in the framework of the constitution of the Republic of Indonesia where diversity can be preserved within the unity of one nation".

An attempt to allow Fr Fernandes to respond was defeated by a four to one majority.

Earlier, during the three day on-off debate, the Rev Kunihiro Sato, Moderator of the National Christian Council of Japan, told a lunchtime gathering, "My country invaded many other countries in the 1940's. We people in Japan were completely under the control of information from our government. We did not know what was happening."

"This is a confession and a kind of advice not to follow our history. We Japanese delegat4s stood up on this issue of East Timor not to condemn, but because of our history" he said.

Russell Rollason
Executive Director
Australian Council for Overseas Aid

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